

Column Can anyone fill Henry Waxman's shoes?



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Rep. Henry Waxman is retiring after 20 terms in Congress. (Alex Wong / Getty Images)

The cliché of Westside politics is that they're soft — arguments about human rights over bowls of kale chips on the verandas of mansions. There's a nugget of truth in that, but politics on the Westside also play out in suburban community centers, union meeting halls and political klatches along Lincoln Boulevard, as I recently saw while reporting on the campaign to succeed legendary congressman Henry Waxman.

When Waxman announced his intention not to seek a 21st term a few months ago, a gaggle of candidates jumped in to vie for his seat. It's an interesting field with some promising contenders; of the 18 candidates, most observers consider Wendy Greuel, Ted Lieu, Matt Miller, Elan Carr and Marianne Williamson to be leading the field, but it's safe to say that none of them, at least so far, fits the 33rd Congressional District in quite the way Waxman has for a couple of generations.

Stretching along the coast from Malibu to the Palos Verdes Peninsula — and reaching inland as far as Hancock Park — the 33rd is the second-wealthiest congressional district in America. In increasingly Latino California, it remains overwhelmingly white, though with a sizable and growing Asian population. Nearly two-thirds of the adults who live in the district have college degrees. The average price of a home is more than \$900,000.

Outsiders take in those numbers and assume the district is merely a privileged playground — the "Botox Belt," as a New York Times reporter recently dubbed it. But the 33rd is also home to auto repair shops and taco stands, senior centers and classic suburbs.

Nor are its politics one-note. Without leaving their district next weekend, voters in the 33rd can attend Torrance's 55th annual Armed Forces Day parade in honor of those who have "defended our country, ensured our freedom and upheld the beliefs and principles that this great nation was built on." Or they can travel to Venice for a "blisscrafting workshop," where participants "expect truth telling, body painting, yoga love, high fives, stained teeth and deep belly laughter."

At its northern tip, the district takes in communities of the West San Fernando Valley, home of the Valley secession movement and what's left of Los Angeles' once-strong conservative base. Moving south, it picks up the liberal havens of Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica and Venice — if there's a Republican left in those areas, he's keeping it to himself — but then changes again as it reaches the Palos Verdes Peninsula, home to engineers and longshoremen, and significantly more conservative than the beach towns to the north.

On a recent Sunday morning, the West Los Angeles Democratic Club hosted a forum for candidates, and both the setting and the session underscored the nuances of Westside politics. It was held in a modest meeting room attached to a Methodist church in Venice; there were sandwiches and coffee rather than wine and cheese.

As for the candidates, they made the requisite appeals to lofty politics — income inequality and the military-industrial complex both got their airings — but they also dug into the nitty-gritty of local challenges. The biggest cheer of the afternoon came when one candidate, Barbara Mulvaney, proposed turning Santa Monica Airport into a dog park. Residents of the 33rd want a representative who thinks big — but who's grounded at home.

Between House votes last week, Waxman reflected on the district he has represented since 1975. Its unifying concerns, he said, include strong support for environmental protection and a devotion to education. Residents care about jobs too, of course: some in aerospace, some in entertainment, some in service industries. And some of their concerns are more parochial. What's left of aerospace in Southern California depends heavily on the Los Angeles Air Force Base, which Waxman has fought for years to keep open.

Waxman fought off a stiff challenge in 2012 from an independent candidate, Bill Bloomfield. After spending nearly \$8 million of his own money, Bloomfield got more than 46% of the ballots cast, raising questions about whether the district's historic Democratic tilt was rebalancing.

Waxman doesn't think so. Redistricting after the 2010 census did produce a more conservative area — the 33rd lost liberal communities such as Cheviot Hills while picking up the Palos Verdes Peninsula — but he argues that it's still probably beyond the reach of a Republican and will remain, as he says, a "Democratic-performing" district.

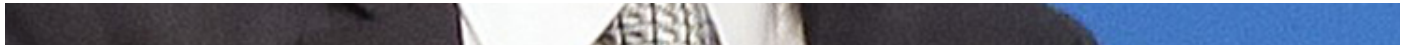
Waxman is best known for his leadership on big issues — he championed universal health insurance, clean air and water, gay rights, and he took on Big Tobacco at a time when that seemed like a lost cause — but he's also practical, grounded in the concerns of his constituents and sensitive to the nuances of this part of California. The challenge for his successor will be to muster those same qualities.

None is quite there yet. At the conclusion of the Democratic Club meeting, the group put it to a vote. No candidate got enough votes to win the endorsement.

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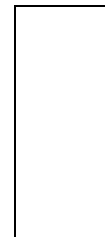
Harvard Law Professor David Barron at a forum at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. (Michael Dwyer / Associated Press)

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